

Self-Determination Perceptions and Behaviors of Diverse Students with LD During the Transition Planning Process

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Abstract

Transition models include components of student self-determination during transition planning meetings. Researchers acknowledge that cultural identity may influence both transition decisions and self-determination strategies. Yet the appropriateness of these approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities (LD) remains unknown. This study examined self-determination perceptions and behaviors of European American, African American, and Hispanic American male adolescents with LD. Data were collected during focus group and individual interviews, observations, and document reviews. Qualitative data analysis provided information about students' behaviors and perceptions during postsecondary transition planning. The findings indicated that differences within this group of diverse participants were subtle. Students identified themselves and family members—rather than teachers—as key players in transition planning. Students perceived that self-determination efforts were thwarted in school contexts, whereas self-determination opportunities in home contexts were more accessible and productive.

Teaching students with learning disabilities (LD) to be self-determining during the transition from high school to adulthood is considered good special education practice (Field, 1996; Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995). Encouraging students with LD to set goals, make choices, and self-assess—key components of self-determination models—may increase their successful transition into adulthood. Also, legislation mandates that school personnel create opportunities for students and their families to participate in the transition planning process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997). In general, self-determination research has focused on students with a variety of cognitive disabilities in the areas of self-determination characteristics and component skills (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Ludi & Martin, 1995; Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001), postsec-

dary outcomes and self-determination (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997), and assessment of self-determination skills and attitudes (Wehmeyer, 1996). Furthermore, important work has been conducted regarding adult efforts to support self-determination (Field & Hoffman, 2002; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Zhang, 2002).

Self-determination has been defined extensively throughout the special education literature (Field, 1996; Schloss, Alper, & Jayne, 1994; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Common threads across definitions include choice, decision making, and goal attainment. In addition to these characteristics, the idea that students with LD must act on their decisions and learn from outcomes and experiences is addressed in each definition of self-determination. Evaluating oneself, acting on self-evaluation, and self-regulating are central components of

self-determination models (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Martin & Huber-Marshall, 1995).

During the early 1990s, a variety of self-determination model programs, many of which promoted student participation in the special education process, were developed (Field, 1996). Programs such as *ChoiceMaker* (Martin & Huber-Marshall, 1995), *Steps to Self-Determination* (Field & Hoffman, 1996), and *Whose Future is it Anyway?* (Wehmeyer, 1995) aim to increase student knowledge of life skills and self-awareness and to increase their participation during transition planning meetings. More recently, research has sought to evaluate both the role of self-determination skills in the postsecondary process and the efficacy of self-determination models. Self-determination skills of students with LD can be increased through instructional methods (Zhang, 2001). Furthermore, these skills have the potential to aug-

ment students' ability to self-regulate learning (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000), to increase goal-setting and self-assessment behaviors (Martin et al., 2003), to promote active participation in the transition planning process (Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995), and to increase employment and independent living outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Yet research also suggests that students are not actively engaged in the transition planning process and do not have consistent opportunities to practice self-determination component skills that should be addressed during transition planning and instruction (Williams & O'Leary, 2001). Teacher and student perspectives regarding participation in the individualized education and transition planning process have been generally positive, but effectively preparing students for active roles in the process continues to challenge educators (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, & Stillerman, 2002).

Important questions about self-determination remain unanswered. Empirical data regarding students' perceptions and behaviors during the Individualized Transition Planning (ITP) process have infrequently been the focus of self-determination research. Morningstar, Turnbull, and Turnbull (1995) found that students placed emphasis on parental support during transition planning and making career-related decisions. Furthermore, the students they interviewed said that parents provided them with opportunities for self-determination with a high degree of variability. As Morningstar et al. indicated, however, more information in this area is needed. Practicing self-determination during the formal transition planning process requires students with LD to complete tasks they may find challenging (e.g., actively participating in ITP meetings, self-disclosing strengths and weaknesses, and requesting services and accommodations; Field, 1996). Preliminary research indicates that students value opportunities to participate in their educational planning, pro-

vided that training and preparation have occurred (Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers, & Wood, 2001; Hapner & Imel, 2002; Mason et al., 2002). Yet a comprehensive list of factors that facilitate active student participation has yet to be supported by empirical evidence.

Another important question that has not been sufficiently addressed in existing research is the impact of students' cultural identities on their self-determination practices and behaviors. The importance of this question cannot be overstated, as U.S. classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. In the 2001–2002 school year, roughly 60% of U.S. schoolchildren were European American, 17% were African American, 17% were Hispanic American, 4% were Asian American, and 1% were American Indian (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). Acknowledging and responding to the needs of diverse students during transition planning has been emphasized in both research and legislation (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Greene & Nefsky, 1999).

Self-determination is steeped in the concepts of normalization and independence (Schloss et al., 1994). Yet these values and their manifestations (e.g., living outside the family home) as acceptable or preferred outcomes (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) are culturally relative. Indeed, many values that guide the special education process in general, such as individualization and consumerism, may seem unfamiliar or inappropriate to people who are not European American and middle class (deFur & Williams, 2002; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Because values can differ both interculturally and intraculturally among community members (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997), culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students transitioning from special education into adult life may approach this transition and their self-determination with a variety of perspectives. The growing body of sociocultural research in the field of special education confirms that a wide range of responses to the

concept of disability and to participation in the special education process exists for CLD students and families (see, e.g., García, Mendez-Pérez, & Ortiz, 2000; Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). The current body of self-determination research does not comprehensively consider the strengths, needs, practices, or preferences of the CLD population. Exploring this area is pertinent because postsecondary outcomes for CLD students (both with and without disabilities) have been a subject of concern among CLD community members, educators, and policymakers.

If self-determination, as it is conceived in the special education literature, is situated in the cultural values and ideas of individualism, normalization, and consumerism, does it follow that students with LD who are not members of dominant U.S. society will differ in their perceptions or behaviors regarding self-determination and postsecondary transition? Although numerous researchers (García et al., 2000; Harry, 1992; Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999) have used a sociocultural theoretical framework to explore issues of CLD parent participation in the special education process, few have focused on postsecondary transition planning. Similarly, little is known about CLD student participation during this process. Because communities and families share cultural values that may differ from those accepted by members of the school community (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999), it is important to examine the perceptions and behaviors of the diverse people served by the special education community. August and Hakuta (1997) argued fervently for the importance of such research in improving the education of CLD students with disabilities.

Gathering input from students from a variety of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds regarding their perceptions and behaviors involving self-determination during postsecondary transition is a necessary step in expanding the self-determination knowledge base for CLD students. Previous

studies involving African American, European American, and Hispanic American youth living in impoverished urban areas have provided evidence in support of the idea that students' cultural identities, of which race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) are components, do affect their approaches to education (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Furthermore, these same studies reveal a lack of understanding on the part of school administrators and teachers, the majority of whom identify as members of the dominant group, regarding the educational needs of CLD students and their families.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the perceptions of African American, European American, and Hispanic American male adolescents with LD regarding self-determination during postsecondary transition planning. Participants' perceptions of parents' and teachers' roles in planning postsecondary opportunities were also explored. Male adolescents were targeted for participation to avoid focus groups composed of both genders, a suggested practice for group interview techniques with adolescents (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In the district where this study was conducted, male students outnumbered female students in the category of LD at a rate of five to two. Current efforts are under way to repeat the study with female participants.

A qualitative approach, including narrative analysis of interview data, was used to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the self-determination behaviors of CLD male adolescents with LD?
2. How do CLD male adolescents with LD perceive their own role and responsibilities regarding transition planning?
3. How do CLD male adolescents with LD perceive the influence of

their parents and teachers on the transition planning process?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling and were organized into focus groups of African American, Hispanic American, and European American participants. All students at participating sites who met the following criteria were invited to participate in this study: (a) male, (b) 16 years or older, (c) receiving services as a student with LD, and (d) eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch programs (FRLP). Eligibility for FRLP was used as an indicator of participants' SES. Typically, recipients of FRLP are students whose families receive public assistance, such as food stamps or federal aid to families with dependent children. Eligibility for FRLP is also determined by using federal guidelines for income and number of dependent children, demonstrating a financial need for assistance. All participants in this study were considered to have low SES.

District policy required a teacher-liaison to conduct initial contact with participants to protect the confidentiality of the special education identification of students. Teacher-liaisons at each site contacted all potential participants and provided them with a written description of the study. The teacher-liaison asked potential participants to submit necessary consent forms if they were interested in participating in the study. All students who met the aforementioned criteria and submitted consent forms were included in the study ($n = 17$). Two students elected to discontinue participation prior to any data collection. Fifteen participants were included in the data collection activities. Table 1 contains a brief description of each participant.

Site

A pool of potential participants was identified at participating sites in Southwest Metropolitan School District (SMSD). District-level demographic information showed that of the total 873 SMSD students with LD, ages 16 and older, 48% were Hispanic American, 28% were European American, 23%

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Participants

Group membership	Age	Grade	Campus
African American			
DeShawn	18	12	City
Martin	16	10	City
Ron	18	11	Southern
Thomas	16	11	Southern
European American			
Earl	16	10	Field
Forest	17	10	Southern
Joe	17	10	Southern
Marshall	16	10	City
Sam	16	10	Field
Trent	16	9	Field
Hispanic American			
Tony	17	12	Southern
Jesus	17	11	Southern
Ricky	17	12	City
Jaime	19	12	City
Michael	16	10	Field

were African American, 0.03% were Native American, and 0.02% were Asian American. Students attended eight district high schools. Three of the eight district high schools that had at least 25% of their enrollees classified as economically disadvantaged agreed to participate in this study. The numbers of potential participants on each campus varied (approximately 20 informational packets were prepared for each campus). The exact racial and ethnic makeup of the potential pool of participants was not made available to the researcher, nor was special education identification by race or ethnicity and by disability category disaggregated in public documents made available by the state's department of education. What is known is that irrespective of disability status, Hispanic American students formed a majority (51%–81%) of the general population at each campus, whereas African American students represented 12% or less and European American students represented between 8% and 31% of the general population at each campus.

Each informational packet contained a description of the study and consent forms in both Spanish and English. All of the Hispanic American participants were dominant in the English language, and each self-reported that both English and Spanish were languages used at home. District home language surveys, housed in a centrally located district office, were not part of students' special education information to which the researcher had access. At each campus, teacher responses to inquiries regarding the language dominance of participants indicated that because the students all spoke English at school, further consideration of language dominance was not pertinent.

Procedure

Once informed consent was secured, data-collection activities commenced. These activities included document reviews of participants' ITPs, observations of participants' ITP meetings, and

focus group and individual follow-up interviews. Field notes accompanying each data-collection activity were also recorded.

Document Reviews. Each student included in this study had an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). Protocol for transition planning in this district included maintaining an ITP that was independent from the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Furthermore, annual ITP meetings, though typically held either immediately preceding or following the annual IEP meeting, were also considered separately. This practice differed from recommended practices that support the use of the IEP as a vehicle for transition-related goals and objectives (Greene, 2003). The most recent amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1997) at the time this study was conducted remain broad but include these requirements for transition planning:

(I) beginning at the age of 14, and updated annually, a statement of the transition service needs of the child under the applicable components of the child's course of study (such as participation in advanced-placement courses or a vocational education program);

(II) beginning at age 16 (or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP Team), a statement of needed transition services for the child, including, when appropriate, a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages. (Section 614 (vii) (I) and (II))

Information collected from these ITP documents included transcriptions of stated goals and linkages to services, annual reviews of goals, ITP meeting attendance, and transition assessment information. The content of ITPs was recorded in a database program for subsequent analysis.

Observations. Observing participants in IEP/ITP meetings before im-

plementing focus groups can provide researchers with an understanding of adolescents' communication norms and patterns, as well as culture and social structures (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). More important, observing how participants practiced self-determination strategies and participated in transition planning—the focal subject of interviews—provided important contextual information and a point for triangulation. Another purpose of observation activities was to note relevant information that remained unnoticed and therefore unspoken by the participants themselves (Patton, 2001).

A subgroup of participants ($n = 4$) was observed during annual ITP/IEP meetings. Changes in district policy and scheduling of annual meetings precluded the inclusion of observations of every participant; therefore, the participant sample for IEP/ITP observations was a convenience sample and included one African American, two European Americans, and one Hispanic American. At least one observation was conducted on each campus. Each meeting comprised different educators and administrators at each site; however, the meetings were consistently facilitated by the special education teacher and attended by an assistant principal and a general education teacher for at least a portion of the entire meeting. The majority of adult participants were European American and female.

Students were present at their ITP meetings, with the exception of Joe, who was on a field trip at the time of his meeting. Consistently absent from these meetings were representatives from outside agencies and school counselors. Each observation lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Participants' comments and nonverbal communication were recorded in observation notes, as permission to videotape or audiotape meetings was not granted. Immediately following each observation, a detailed second set of field notes containing the researcher's impressions and interpretations of participants' words and actions and their in-

teractions with adult team members was prepared.

Interviews. Focus group interviews were conducted with groups of participants based on their racial or ethnic identification. Each meeting was 1 to 1½ hours in duration. The atmosphere of the focus group meetings was informal and the tone conversational. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol during focus group interviews. Participants were asked open-ended questions such as, "What are your dreams for your future?" and "How do you communicate these dreams to your teachers and parents?" See the Appendix for a complete interview protocol. Group interviews were recorded by audiovisual equipment.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to give participants the opportunity to revisit some of the topics or clarify previous statements and to check the researcher's impressions with participants' reactions and recollections (Patton, 2001). Follow-up interviews, recorded on audiotape, were conducted with each participant individually after the focus group interviews and lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. A separate protocol was not developed for the individual follow-up interviews; rather, the researcher asked for clarification of responses made during the focus group interviews or probed these responses. Field notes documenting the researcher's observations and impressions during both interview processes were recorded immediately following interviews. Two participants (one African American and one European American) were included in individual interviews, although each had missed his opportunity to participate in focus group interviews.

Researcher as Instrument. The quality of qualitative research is judged in part by the researcher's credibility, or the level of accuracy with which the researcher is able to represent the perceptions of the participants, and is in-

extricably related to the researcher's personal background (Patton, 2001). Based on my race and ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic background, and status as a person without LD, I was an outsider through much of the research process. I did, however, attempt to minimize the effects of my differences with participants.

First, I drew on the experiences I have had working as a high school special education teacher and relating and communicating with adolescents with disabilities. Second, I employed sound cross-cultural communication practices (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997) and components of cultural reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Third, during each focus group meeting, I included a moderator aide (Vaughn, Shumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Each aide had characteristics similar to group participants'. Moderator aides were male, were racially and ethnically representative of the participants, and had experience communicating and working with adolescents. Finally, interpretations of results were shared with insider researchers (members of the racial and ethnic groups represented in the participant groups) during peer debriefing exercises.

Data Analysis

Participant narratives, in the form of transcripts of participants' verbatim responses to interview questions, and field notes, which described participants' nonverbal participation and communication styles during observations and interviews, were reviewed multiple times. Pertinent findings from document reviews, observation notes, and field notes were used to provide contextual information and narrative descriptions and explanations of emergent themes.

Interviews. Both focus group and follow-up interview data—primary sources of data—were analyzed for recurring themes using a line-by-line examination of the text (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Categorical content analysis of data (i.e., categorizing units of text that carry a common theme) was employed (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). As text was categorized (*open coding*), themes emerged, and these were connected to the topic of self-determination during postsecondary transition (*theoretical coding*; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes that described the themes were applied to the data. For example, when participants spoke about going to college, text units were labeled *college* and placed in the category *long-range goals*. Initially, 12 broad categories were used to describe text units; subcategories for each main category varied in number from 2 to 9. Relationships among categories and subcategories were depicted using tree diagram models. Analysis and categorization of text was a cyclical rather than linear process; once themes emerged, data were revisited, and additional relationships among the themes and theory were determined.

To aid in the organization and analysis of data, a qualitative data analysis software program, N4 Classic™, was used. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software helps researchers search large sets of data, retrieve data for coding, and organize analyses (Seale, 2002). Initial efforts to code data included the creation of base codes; therefore, the documents and their extractions contained codes for variables such as age, grade, race and ethnicity, and campus. For example, all quotes from DeShawn's interviews were coded as African American, as 18-year-old, as senior, and for the campus he attended. This process facilitated pattern analysis across participants by these four variables. The variable for race and ethnicity, an obvious choice for base-code data, was one focus of analysis because the research questions engaged this issue. Once base-code data tables had been imported, open coding began. Each data file of transcribed interviews was imported into N4 Classic™ software. Key quotes from the participants were selected and categorized.

Document Reviews. Analysis of data collected during document reviews of participants' ITPs was handled somewhat differently than interview data. These data were not integrated into an N4 Classic™ software database because the range of data was narrow. Student ITPs were similar because teachers used a master ITP from which to generate transitional goals for each student. A spreadsheet program was used to record the frequency of variables both within and across racial and ethnic groups. Tables of goals, objectives, dates, participants, and checklists were recorded.

Observation Notes and Field Notes. During each data collection activity, from recruitment of participants to observations of ITP meetings, field notes were recorded. These contained verbatim participant comments and contextual descriptions. As the practice of qualitative research requires researchers to reflect on their interpretations of the data collected (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), a duplicate set of field notes that contained the researcher's subjective reactions to observations and verbatim recordings was recorded. Because observation data were limited by the small number of participants whose ITP meetings were available for observation, these data sets were searched manually and were used to provide a more comprehensive examination of interview data, contextual variables, and researcher interpretations.

Results

Analysis of data yielded five themes that captured students' behaviors and perceptions regarding self-determination during the postsecondary transition planning process. The focus of this analysis was the diversity of perspectives as they related to the cultural identities of the participants. Although attempts were made to examine the extent to which diverse backgrounds

may have influenced participants' behaviors and perceptions, comparisons of students across groups resulted in only subtle differences between the members of each group; therefore, these data and their analysis should be considered a preliminary effort to explore self-determination among diverse groups of participants. Each of the five themes is discussed in this section.

Missing Connections Between ITPs and Postsecondary Plans

In many cases, exit goals did not match students' interview responses. In the area of employment, mismatch occurred. Four of the Hispanic American students were working while attending school, and some of them expressed a desire to continue in their current line of work. For example, two Hispanic American participants worked in family-owned businesses, one in light construction and the other in auto repair. Yet the ITPs of these young men lacked goals that connected their current employment experiences to their employment-related goals. For European American participants, only one of whom maintained a part-time job, ITP goals did not establish a connection between their stated career interests and their extracurricular activities or coursework. For example, Sam was interested in culinary arts but stated that he was not enrolled in related vocational programs. Also, Earl and Trent each discussed a strong desire to join the military after graduation, but neither was enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs for high school students that were available at their campus.

One important area of mismatch was the stated goal of all participants to attend college versus the exemption of some of these students from state exit exams. African American participants, three of whom had older siblings who had enrolled in college, described their plans to attend postsecondary education settings in detail. Self-deter-

mination efforts to make decisions, set goals, and take action toward goal attainment included students' efforts to visit college Web sites and seek literature regarding programs of interest, participate in on-campus visits, and obtain information about SAT test preparation. European American and Hispanic American participants also stated their intentions of attending either university or community college programs, but they articulated these plans with less specificity. Their exemption from standardized exit tests indicated that students were not taking college preparatory courses. Also, exemption rates varied by group membership: Three of the four African American participants were exempted, whereas three of the six European Americans and four of the five Hispanic Americans were exempted.

Also, mismatch occurred in the domain of independent living. Participants across groups (majority Hispanic American) said they intended to live at home after high school, yet their corresponding goals for independent living were "obtain independent residence without supports." Ten of the 15 ITP documents had no stated goals in this transition domain.

Participating on the Periphery

Across groups, participants in this study were largely uninvolved in their transition planning process. Most participants said that they associated ITP meetings with scheduling courses for the following year. Although participants associated ITPs with statements about their plans for the future, they were not aware of the potential importance of an ITP or of the services and programmatic resources to which they should have access in preparation for postsecondary transition. Fourteen of the 15 students signed their current ITPs, but none recalled specifics of the meeting, nor could any of them state the contents of the document. When asked to define the term *transition plan*, the most common answer was "don't

know." Document reviews and observations as well as students' responses to interview questions revealed that student participation in ITP conferences was nominal rather than substantive. Only 2 of the 15 ITPs contained information regarding preconferencing strategies used to engage students and glean students' transition-related preferences.

Generally, meetings started with a brief review of the ITP, led by the special education teacher, and included phrases such as "what he wants to do with his life" and "career interests." Discussion followed the review of special education forms. For example, the teacher would first address exit goals and then ITP objectives in the transition domains listed on the form. Transition planning procedures and the content of discussion were determined by school personnel rather than by students and families, regardless of group membership. Teachers maintained the ITP forms until it was time to collect signatures, with copies being distributed after the meetings. The review of ITPs seemed to be driven by the form itself. For example, when Joe's father brought up his concerns regarding his son's ability to get a job, the teacher responded by asking where Joe's father expected his son to live after graduation (the next item on the exit goal list).

Updating existing ITPs rather than generating new goals or plans was typical. When the team discussed changes, they were not always recorded on the ITP. For example, Joe's ITP originally stated that goals in employment and independent living were not necessary. Discussion about linking him to a job coach, initiated by school personnel, did not appear in writing on the ITP in the form of objectives or linkages to services. Furthermore, Joe's stated interest of becoming a medical doctor was not recorded on the ITP. Follow-up data regarding the completion of transition-related goals were also lacking. For example, "encourage enrollment in driver's education" was a goal on all

15 ITPs, but two participants had their driver's licenses, and others discussed their perceptions that enrollment in driver's education was not appropriate or desirable.

Across groups, participants did not connect the ITP to any action on the part of themselves, their teachers, or other school personnel. If follow-up actions or services had occurred, students did not report these. Document reviews did reveal that the objectives required various members of the team to follow up on transition efforts, but that objectives were rarely phrased with the student as the subject. Rather, these objectives were written as directives for school personnel, such as "discuss vocational program" or "assist with job counseling and obtaining competitive employment."

For DeShawn, participation in an IEP/ITP meeting did not occur until his junior year:

Half the time I didn't even know about it. . . . I know in elementary I was [in special education], up until my fourth grade year, and after that . . . they put me in all regular classes after that. I had a couple of honor classes. . . . I never had any special ed classes. So I really didn't know . . . until my eleventh grade year; that's when I found out. Because I went to fill out my Choice Sheet of what I wanted this year, and that's when [the principal] told me. . . . She was like, "Have you been to these [IEP/ITP meetings]?" I was like, "No." She said, "Did you know that you were a special ed student?" and I was like "No."

During interviews, participants across groups expressed the sentiment that they were not discussants at ITP meetings. In observations, teachers and administrators commonly addressed parents about the needs of their children, rather than addressing the students themselves, as I observed in Forest's ITP meeting:

Teacher: Forest wants to do something with Latin. (to grandmother)

He needs to set goals and get all his credits. He failed some classes last year.

Grandmother: He doesn't do anything. (She begins to cry.)

Assistant principal: All this can be easily cleared up if Forest would just do what he has to do.

Forest: Yeah, I know.

Assistant principal: He has a lot of unexcused absences.

Grandmother: They are excused. (goes into lengthy explanation for teachers)

Sam articulated an oft-expressed sentiment of many participants:

Yeah, or you're not sure if they're talking about you or not. . . . They don't really show me the paperwork most of the time; they just show my mom. . . . I understand what I sign. If you have to sign something, it's pretty important, I think. Like, if they need a signature, then you should read over it at least twice.

During the focus group meeting with European American participants, an exchange took place that illustrated participants' ambivalence about being on the periphery of ITP development:

Trent: I just sit there and listen. They're like, "Is this okay with you?" "Okay." . . . It really doesn't matter because it's like nothing really big. I mean they ask questions like, do you want to have 2 extra days on homework and stuff. "Yeah." That's basically all they asked me.

Sam: I don't really talk. I just let them go on and talk to my mom. They look at me every once in a while, and I'll just be like, "Sure."

Forest: Just smile and nod.

Sam: I smile and nod and everything will be all right. (Focus group members share a laugh.)

Participants described the majority of their interactions in ITP meetings as being driven by adult expectations and requirements. Jaime, who attended with his mother, said that she expected him to behave and not participate too much. Jaime said it was easier just to listen: "And they talk to her too. No one really talks to me too. And they ask me what I want to take next year or after my school year is over."

Thomas seemed to feel the same way: "I really go just to hear what they're going to say. I like looking at my parents' reactions, like, 'Hmmm, should we do that?' Most of the time I'm sitting in a corner smiling or laughing or something."

Participants' comments regarding ITP meetings revealed that the *process* rather than the *product* made a greater impression on them. Thomas's comment was representative of members across groups:

I think I've heard [the term ITP] before at the [annual] meeting. It's a good thing. He said it right before he changed my schedule. . . . I don't know what they put on it. I know I don't write on it. I know somebody writes on it, but it's not me, so I don't know what they put. I know college is probably on it, but they probably threw in like a math major or something.

During his ITP conference, Forest stated his desire to be a university Latin teacher and said that he would "probably [need] a college degree" to pursue this career, revealing his lack of awareness about the prerequisites of this goal. None of the adults engaged him in conversation about the likelihood of this goal becoming a reality, or the necessary planning, although his Latin teacher did send a note that he had been "acting goofy" during class. Given this experience, it is not surprising that he and the other students associated their participation in IEP/ITP meetings with "getting in trouble" and felt intimidated or defensive when they attended their annual meetings:

Teachers tell too much info . . . half of the time. And the worst is just because they want you in this class, and the teacher starts telling all the bad things you did, like a long time ago you fell asleep in her class and you come late all the time. Stuff like that. . . . Then I look at my mom and say, "I be tired sometimes."

(Ron, focus group and individual interview)

I don't know. It just makes me nervous. All of my teachers are in there, and they'll be talking about all this stuff that I need, and I'll just start getting nervous. The worst thing would probably be getting in trouble. Being embarrassed.

(Marshall, individual interview)

Relying on Family for Transition Planning

Participants across groups said that they generally did not discuss transition planning with their teachers or other school personnel, but they did not express resentment or frustration as a result of having limited contact with their ITP team members, nor did they identify this as a possible obstacle to goal attainment:

Actually, I don't think they had a chance to be able to ask me. Usually, I'm the kind of person, I will sit in the back, I'll have my jacket on, my CD player, listening to it and trying to do my work. I'm not disturbing nobody, so I don't think they do know [my plans for the future]. But if they do come over with something like that, I'll do it. I'll tell them what I want to be.

(Ricky, focus group)

In the context of home and family, transition planning differed from school-defined activities (e.g., developing an ITP) and consisted of conversations about future goals and immediate actions needed to realize these goals. Participants (across groups, but more commonly African Americans and Hispanic Americans) said that conversations with family members involved

solving problems and maintaining control of pressing academic situations (e.g., parental reminders to attend school or complete homework). For example, when Thomas talked about practicing basketball and his desire to play collegiate sports, his mother would remind him of the importance of academics.

When Forest discussed his plans to own a skateboarding park, his uncle asked him to write a business plan and gave him constructive feedback. Participants also said that when their goals for the future conflicted with the expectations of their parents or guardians, the final say rested with them. For example, Jaime said that he was expected to join the family business rather than pursue a career in soccer, but that his mother told him to "follow his dreams." Still, he planned to consult with family members before making any decisions. Similarly, Ron said his mother accepted his unwillingness to pursue a career in the military although she was a veteran.

African Americans and European Americans reported more instances of interaction during meetings among their parents, teachers, and themselves. Ron, Martin, and Thomas all shared instances in which their parents drew them into discussions. If teachers asked parents which courses were preferable, parents then asked their sons. Participants agreed that parents were easier to talk to than teachers, but often reported waiting until after the meeting:

Yeah, I'll talk to my mom later on if she asked me about it. But not all the time. I keep my mouth quiet.

(Ron, focus group)

Like, if the teacher calls my house and she wants to change me to like a different class period, I'll let my parents handle that. They know me a lot better.

(Thomas, individual interview)

Hispanic American participants discussed mutual involvement during

ITP meetings with less frequency and said they were responsible for school-related decision making. Ricky said that, at times, he needed to explain to his father what was happening during special education meetings: "He tells me just to participate in this [special education] thing. And I do and I help him out. If they tell him one thing and he didn't get it, I'll help him out."

Attempting Self-Determination

Participants across groups exhibited component skills of self-determination during the interviewing process. All participants identified goals of attending postsecondary education (in both university and community college settings), and each identified at least one career-related goal. Participants also identified their strengths and weaknesses, discussing academic difficulties and learning-related problems. Many of the strengths they identified included interests and hobbies outside of school, such as athletics, auto mechanics, and job skills. To a lesser extent, participants were able to articulate their progress toward goal attainment and future needs, but their responses in this area tended to be vague. For example, participants across groups discussed the fact that they needed to improve their academic performance if they were going to go to college by stating that they needed to "just do the work" or "get on track."

Also, across groups, participants perceived home environments to be facilitative of self-determination, particularly their parents' efforts to seek their opinions and choices and provide them with emotional support; yet they discussed obstacles to self-determination in the school environment. Observation data revealed that teachers mentioned both strengths and weaknesses, but that the weaknesses provided a consistent focal point for discussion. All participants expressed anxiety and dislike of negative reports that teachers relayed during meetings:

I thought they were going to talk to my mom and dad about my grades and everything, but it wasn't about it, so . . . so I didn't have to be nervous anymore. (Earl, individual interview)

Well, my teacher says she's going to a meeting, and then they want to talk to my parents. I just want to be there and see if they're going to tell the truth. Sometimes they are like, yeah, Joe does this or Joe does that. . . . Like I had one teacher, and she kept on telling me that I didn't bring my pencil. I had a pencil, and she said that I borrowed that pencil. And I was like, "No, I didn't." (Joe, focus group)

Across groups, participants sometimes experienced embarrassment and humiliation. Ricky said that he felt very bad during his most recent meeting. The meeting, originally described as both a disciplinary and annual IEP/ITP meeting by the special education teacher, was primarily a manifestation determination meeting, the main purpose of which was to determine whether recent verbal threats made by Ricky toward other students were related to his LD, and whether regular disciplinary procedures would apply. During the observation of this meeting, Ricky said little, turned red, and averted his gaze toward the table or floor. When Forest's grandmother alluded to his depression and drug use during his annual ITP review, she told teachers he had stopped bathing. He was agitated, raised his voice, and insulted his grandmother, contradicting the loving comments he made about her during interviews. Observation notes and interview data reflected participants' withdrawal from meeting participation in these instances.

Participants reported that teachers did not respond to their requests or questions about decisions involving their futures. Both Jesus and Tony self-advocated to participate in vocational education programs that would allow them to work during the school day. Tony had not been successful in finding employment or in securing assistance from the special education voca-

tional instructor. He said he was instructed to take a free period until he found work. Similarly, Jesus had to find his own job, and he eventually gave up on enrolling in the vocational program on his campus. Their experiences contradicted the purpose of the district's vocational programs, which is to assist youth in obtaining employment experiences.

Martin clearly identified his goal to attend college, and his independent efforts showed that he took action toward this goal. He visited campuses, and he sought information about college programs based on knowledge of his own strengths and interests. When his scheduled Spanish class (indicating college preparatory coursework) was switched to a plan involving no foreign language requirements, he asked why but said he did not find out much about the change:

They said they were changing it, but they didn't tell me why. [I] wondered why. . . . I did want to learn Spanish, but from what they tell me, it is hard. But that wouldn't stop me. I'll just try to take it next year. I tried to sign up for it [again], but they didn't give it to me. If I try to go in there [and find out], they are like, "You need to come back to us later. We are very busy right now."

In Forest's meeting, he repeatedly made it known that he was struggling with decision making and needed structure and guidance. Teachers' responses indicated that they did not think additional support was appropriate. Both the special education teacher and the administrator said they *could* implement a behavioral contract but added "if that's what you want," indicating that this might not be optimal for Forest. No support plan resulted from his ITP meeting:

Forest: I am stuck. I do not know if I want to get my GED or my diploma. I know what I want to do, but I am not taking any steps. . . . I am just getting my life back [post-

probation] and I have all these choices, and I don't know what to do. . . .

Teacher: Well, the thing is, being on probation is not real life. We can put you on all these contracts for attendance and so on, but you have to make the choices. . . .

Forest: I am making bad decisions, but I don't know why.

Across groups, participants also perceived that their parents had limited control during meetings with school personnel. Marshall expressed a common observation that students made about their parents' participation in these meetings. He said that usually his mother "just sits there and listens." When asked if he felt comfortable expressing himself at these same meetings, he said, "I would tell them that I didn't like it, I cannot do computers, and I don't want to get that class. . . . Maybe [I'd tell the committee]. . . . I don't know. Probably my shyness [would hold me back]."

During observations, parents asked teachers for accommodations and expressed concerns about their sons' educational progress, yet school personnel were not always receptive. Forest's grandmother (his guardian) asked for help in regard to Forest's recent struggle with depression and substance abuse, but teachers responded by looking down at the table or at their paperwork rather than addressing the availability of drug treatment or mental health programs. Similarly, when Joe's father expressed concern about his son's social skill challenges, the special education vocational teacher spoke of job coaches and independent living arrangements.

During the manifestation determination meeting for Ricky, his father stated his frustration and pointed out that his opinions differed from the school's perspective:

Well, you know, I do not think you should just push these kids out, how

about really caring? You know, you change kids' schedules, tell them they are going to be an auto mechanic, and then there are all these changes? And I think this had changed him and his feelings. What about all his feelings?

As the following exchange indicates, both Ricky and his father had limited input in the proceedings:

Assistant principal: (turns off tape recorder) Now the removal will start.

Father: (upset and heavy sigh, talking to son) You already know the decision; she has already decided.

Teacher: We all have preknowledge of the consequences of this.

Assistant principal: (turns tape back on) Now, sir, we are here to be civil. Right now we are doing the removal hearing. . . .

Second assistant principal: I am deciding to remove the child because (reads from script the outcome of manifest determination). . . . Do you (addressing father) or Ricky have any comment?
(They both shake their heads)

Actualizing Self-Determination Efforts

Scenarios of participants exercising self-determination during transition planning were typically preceded by invitations from adults to practice decision making within a prescribed range of options. Examples included stating preferences in the context of options that the school defined and offered, such as selecting courses and placement in job-training programs. Ricky's self-determination included his resolve to work toward graduation after a temporary placement at an alternative campus, where he was sent following an infraction of school rules: "I know I am not going to drop out even if I do come a couple of more years, I still will be in high school and graduate. I won't ever stop trying to pass, because I want to."

More than participants from other groups, Hispanic Americans shared self-determination strategies with one another. Examples included the following:

Well, when I come in the classroom, [the teachers] already know me by heart, and they don't even know anybody else, and I feel like, wow, they sure know me even if they don't know anybody else. And then I start talking to them about this and that. When they ask questions I tell them about myself. Every day I keep telling them what goes on with my life or something. Like, I tell Ms. B every day and Mr. D every day that I still haven't gotten my school jacket yet or my senior shirt yet. They keep asking about that, and they try to help me out with it the best they can.
(Tony, individual interview)

That's what I do. I kept talking to my [special education] teacher every day, kept bugging them and they did it. So, I don't have my seventh period. I only wanted to have four, but they had gave me six [periods].
(Ricky, focus group)

Nevertheless, as Earl's comment suggests, participants saw themselves as recipients rather than causal agents in formal transition planning: "[going to ITP meetings] finding out what they're going to do to me. What they're going to try to do to me."

Discussion

As is typical of qualitative research, this study was based on an inductive inquiry designed to describe the self-determination behaviors and perceptions of male adolescents with LD during transition planning meetings. The nature of qualitative research, and in particular of naturalistic inquiry, is to pose questions and to capture an experience or process with as little manipulation from the researcher as possible (Patton, 2001). Results from qualitative analysis, therefore, have the potential to be unpredictable. Although the anal-

ysis of interview data from this group of CLD youth yielded only subtle differences in self-determination perceptions and behaviors across groups of participants in this study, another mediating variable—that of school culture—emerged. Throughout the data, there were hints that participants with varying cultural identities did perceive and experience self-determination differently, but these differences were difficult to capture because opportunities for participants to practice self-determination during transition planning—one element of school culture—were limited. Thus, the original research questions, based on the idea that people with various cultural identities would have diverse approaches in regard to self-determination, have remained unanswered. The emergence of school culture variables that obfuscated students' self-determination development and practice during transition planning has been documented in other studies (Field & Hoffman, 2002; Hasazi, Furney, & Destefano, 1999; Williams & O'Leary, 2001).

Nevertheless, participants articulated their use of self-determining behaviors during postsecondary transition planning, which included their use of self-knowledge to set goals and their attempts to take action toward those goals. Taking action toward goals included self-advocating their needs and interests to school personnel and enlisting the help of parents and families as needed. Moreover, several of the students participated in activities (e.g., employment, research, making connections with experienced siblings and other relatives) that contributed to their efforts to self-assess and realign goals. One interesting result of this study was the participants' references to opportunities to practice self-determination at home. Previous reports of parent perceptions regarding the self-determination practices of their children have been divergent. Some studies have indicated that parents are not comfortable providing such opportunities (Zhang et al., 2002).

Other studies (see, e.g., Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003) have documented parental support for self-determination instruction and opportunities for their children. Although it is possible that participants in this study overreported or embellished the amount of self-determination they were afforded at home, the emphasis that participants placed on parent-sanctioned opportunities for practicing self-determination is important to consider. Across groups, participants provided numerous examples of specific ways in which their parents supported their decision-making, goal-setting, and self-assessment efforts by using caring attitudes, taking time to discuss important issues with their children, and providing choices.

Perhaps participants discussed self-determination opportunities in which they participated in transition meetings independently because the parents of these participants relied on their children to engage in self-determination. For example, Hispanic American participants who discussed attending transition meetings without their parents may have done so because their knowledge of the English language was more advanced than their parents' knowledge. Further study of this issue is necessary to determine the exact reason why parents did not attend these meetings. Comments from Hispanic American participants in this study are congruent with findings from existing studies of Hispanic American parents' interactions both with their children and with the schools their children attend. For example, participants in this study emphasized that their parents valued education-related goals and very much cared about their children's educational progress—a sentiment that has been well documented in previous studies (Romo & Falbo, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Across groups, participants' perceptions regarding both self-determination and transition planning revealed that they identified themselves

as responsible for transition planning; yet they said that parents and family members were key contributors to choice and decision making, goal setting, and goal attainment. These results are in agreement with existing research (Morningstar et al., 1995). African Americans in this study were more likely to discuss the importance of emotional support, but European Americans and Hispanic Americans also said this was key. Furthermore, across groups, participants revealed that they did not perceive teachers as central figures in their transition planning process. Participants also cited examples in which they perceived that their self-determination efforts had been thwarted in the context of school, but that opportunities to practice self-determination in the context of home were more accessible and productive.

Participants generally described sustained efforts to attain goals and gave no examples of "giving up." Many referenced the hardships and dislike of school but, across groups, they identified multiple reasons for continuing to try, most commonly "to be the first in my family to graduate." Common across groups were participants' comments that indicated their lack of knowledge regarding exactly what steps to take to make their dreams and aspirations become realities. This is not surprising, given the ample evidence demonstrating that students with LD are not always familiar with the skills necessary for desired adult-living goals, such as employment, and that current models of career development have been based on the needs and strategies of European American, middle class adolescents (Rojewski, 2002). Determining steps to goal attainment may be even more complex for people who experience the disadvantages of low socioeconomic status and, as a result, lack the cultural capital to access crucial resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Furthermore, recent research has indicated that students need explicit instruction of self-determination skills to increase

their participation in transition planning (Mason et al., 2002).

Observations and document reviews were used to triangulate interview data. Viewed holistically, the data illustrated several areas in which transition planning did not seem to follow recommended practices established in the existing literature. The results of this study showed that transition plans were considered outside of the Individualized Education Programs of participants, and individualization, student engagement, and self-determination were limited—findings that have been supported in previous research (Williams & O'Leary, 2001). Of particular interest are the findings of the document review indicating that African American and Hispanic American participants were exempted from exit examinations and enrolled in vocational education programs more frequently than their European American peers, although all participants indicated their plans to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities. The qualitative data gathered in this study do not permit conclusions regarding the significance of this disparity to be drawn; however, these findings do establish questions for future research. All results herein must be interpreted with caution, because many of the details regarding district policy and implementation of transition programs were not examined closely. Rather, students' comments were the principal subject of this inquiry.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study are in concurrence with other work that has spotlighted schools' compliance with the letter rather than the spirit of IDEA (see, e.g., Grigal, Test, Beattie, & Wood, 1997). In fact, data from this study suggest that although all participants did have transition plans, the extent to which these plans complied with federal transition mandates varied. For example, the plans were clearly not in-

dividualized. Moreover, at least one ITP meeting was held without the presence of the student. Also, scant evidence emerged to support that school personnel acted on any of the goals contained in participants' transition plans. Nevertheless, participants' formal transition planning meetings appeared to be process driven. Rigorous application of the preferred practices and legislative mandates contained in IDEA can help maximize student involvement and person-centered planning.

Engage Students in the ITP Process. The results of this study have confirmed the findings of earlier studies that have documented students' lack of involvement in transition planning (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998; Morningstar et al., 1995; Van Reusen & Bos, 1990). Frequent opportunities to include students in transition-related conversations and activities are essential. Students need ongoing opportunities to reflect on their future goals. The ITP team needs to help students see connections between planning and goal attainment. Existing research has supported the designation of specific personnel to facilitate transition planning (Hasazi et al., 1999). Designated school personnel (e.g., transition specialist, guidance counselor) should meet with students regularly. Furthermore, because students with LD are often enrolled in general education classes, postsecondary goal setting and self-determination should be embedded in course curricula. For students enrolled in content mastery or resource classes, reviews of ITP goals should occur in these settings. Involving students in projects that require them to explore and demonstrate an understanding of the rights of people with disabilities is another necessary preplanning activity. With coaching and guidance, students could create a Web site or portfolio that provides a summary of educational rights for students with disabilities. Moreover, adult members of the ITP team should speak

directly to student participants and inquire about their postsecondary preferences, treating them as integral members of the team, following the principles of person-centered planning.

Many of the participants expressed their opinion that they felt scolded during transition meetings. Although teachers and parents should address negative behaviors, the use of self-determination models could facilitate students' effective decision-making skills. This would include helping students to enumerate their strengths and connect these to possible strategies for goal attainment, in addition to identifying needs and appropriate avenues for assistance (Field, 1996).

Align Curricular Plan with Student Goals. Given that many of the participants (majority African American and Hispanic American) were enrolled in vocational education programs, the content of these programs should be closely aligned with students' ITPs. To adolescents, particularly those who are in low-SES groups and who struggle with attaining academic success, vocational programs that allow for an early release during the school day and an opportunity to earn money seem attractive. To practice self-determination, however, students need to fully understand the implications of these programs. For example, they need to understand that early release for employment may conflict with their enrollment in college-preparatory coursework. To increase their decision-making skills, students must receive explicit instruction regarding the expected outcomes of vocational and college-preparatory curricular decisions. Similarly, students need to understand the implications of standardized test exemptions and resulting diploma types offered by their districts, so that they can participate in curricular decisions that align with their postsecondary goals. Students with intentions of attending college need to understand that college-

preparatory courses are distinct from vocational programs.

Individualize ITPs. Transition plans must address individuals' specific strengths and needs. The use of a "master" ITP with general, prerecorded goals contradicts recommended practices. Instead of using the initial ITP as a checklist for subsequent years, meaningful discussion must include the review of existing goals as well as new or updated goals. Once a goal is accomplished, it should be removed from the ITP. If progress toward a goal is not being made, the team needs to engage in problem solving and adjust existing goals. Individualization, an approach that has prevailed in special education for more than a decade, should be within the capabilities of teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and administrators in this field.

Maintain Multidisciplinary ITP Teams. Data revealed that often ITP teams did not include general education teachers or guidance counselors familiar to the participants. Collaboration among professionals is key to providing the necessary supports for both transition and self-determination, including linking students to appropriate adult services. At least one participant in this study reported discussing the possibility of attending college with a general education teacher. Had this person been invited and attended the transition meeting, perhaps she or he could have questioned the exemption status of the student and at least brought the discussion forward.

Increase Parent and Family Involvement. Participants gave many examples of ways in which they engaged in informal transition planning with family members. These findings are in agreement with previous studies that demonstrated the importance of family in career choices and transition planning support (Morningstar et al., 1995). The connection between transi-

tion planning activities accomplished at home (e.g., sibling modeling, parental expectations of college enrollment) was lost in the school context. Students should be encouraged to invite members of their home communities to their ITP meetings, and school personnel must practice cultural reciprocity and demonstrate both understanding of and deference to the values held by CLD parents and families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). This practice should include listening to the concerns of families, incorporating their strengths and preferences, and providing them with explicit information about transition-related decisions, thus increasing their cultural capital.

Participants' comments reflected numerous instances in which both their strengths and their self-determination skills were fostered at home. Teachers' efforts should complement parents' and family members' efforts to increase students' self-determination and transition planning activities. Moreover, teachers need to use a strengths-based approach to planning and eliminate deficit-oriented methods of addressing both students and their families. Encouraging students to discuss postsecondary options with family members and to share this information during planning activities is one method to increase family involvement. School personnel should talk with students about these topics and find out how transition planning coincides with home communities. Families and school personnel need to engage in explicit discussions regarding the implementation of students' ITPs. Participants based their postsecondary goals on advice from parents and family members, yet these adults did not always have the experience or knowledge to help students make informed decisions. Parents need to know the implications of enrollment in programs such as vocational education, early release for working students, and the exit test exemption status of their children. Effective communication of this type of information will require

multiple contacts and possibly the use of multiple modes of communication.

Implications for Research

Examine Inhibitors and Facilitators of Self-Determination. The time required for students and ITP team members to collaboratively develop ITPs and to actualize plans seemed unavailable to participants. This may be particularly challenging for students with LD who are included in general education courses. Also, many participants were experiencing academic failure, which required time for problem solving and remediation. Existing research has demonstrated that the implementation of self-determination models takes time (Field & Hoffman, 2002) and that once implemented, such models have the potential to increase students' self-determination and transition planning participation (Mason et al., 2002; Zhang, 2001). Additional research should be conducted to determine how participation in special education accommodates multiple demands on students' time.

Other external variables, such as the power distances between students and school personnel and the access to information regarding the implication of course selection and vocational program enrollment, need to be carefully examined. Adult ITP team members also potentially facilitate or hinder the self-determination efforts of students (Field, Hoffman, & Spezia, 1998). Across groups, participants' anecdotes revealed their perception that school personnel used deficit model thinking. Participants also indicated that teachers did not acknowledge their attempts at self-determination. Why did this conflict occur?

Participants (majority African American) emphasized the value they placed on having caring school personnel, providing examples of ways in which caring teachers facilitated their self-determination efforts. Participants across groups emphasized the relational aspects of learning, which were

similar to the perspectives of general education U.S.-Mexican students in Valenzuela's (1999) study. Additional research should examine the efficacy of implementing a pedagogy of caring on self-determination and participation in transition planning. Educators need to understand how to demonstrate genuine caring to diverse populations of students and to what extent such caring can promote student involvement.

Parent Involvement. How parents contribute to the self-determination of their children also merits further study. Although programs that address the development of students' self-determination and parenting skills that facilitate self-determination exist (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Ludi & Martin, 1995; Serna & Lau-Smith, 1995), the parents of participants in this study, unlike those included in previous research (Zhang et al., 2002), were identified as facilitators of self-determination. Were the participants' parents in this study atypical? Or do parents support self-determination in ways that previous research has not recognized? Because existing studies have documented teachers' deficit-oriented views of CLD parents (Harry, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999), examining the strengths of CLD parents is important so that educators can learn to build trusting and productive collaborative relationships with families, many of whom may have values and beliefs about disability, self-determination, and transition that differ from the expectations of school personnel.

Mismatch Between Students' Goals and ITP Content. Mismatches between participants' intentions to attend college and exit test exemption status were observed. Were teacher expectations low and predisposed against students with LD going to college? Were students with LD unable to navigate the standardized exit test system? Were teachers' perceptions of CLD students biased? Interviewing adult ITP team members to determine which factors contribute to decision making re-

garding exit test exemption status is worthy of future research. In regard to goals in other domains, such as employment and independent living, what processes are necessary to increase the congruency between students' aspirations and their ITP goals?

Expanding Self-Determination Theory. Environmental and contextual aspects of self-determination theory are in need of further study (Abery & Stancliffe, 2003). In particular, the results of this study underscore the need to examine ecological variables that detail the macro (e.g., society, school, family) and micro (e.g., individual) contextual variables and their interaction with one another. Whereas prevailing models have presented self-determination as a composite of individual characteristics, skills, and attitudes, a broader conceptualization is necessary to create comprehensive and useful models of self-determination in CLD home and school communities. Whereas participants across groups shared many perceptions and experiences, subtle differences in the way students responded to self-determination opportunities and transition planning activities did occur. By documenting student perspectives, this study has expanded existing research that has documented the variability of parent participation and transition planning (Geenen et al., 2001). Our nation of CLD learners demands continued efforts in this area. In addition to the exploration of cultural identity and its potential to affect self-determination preferences (e.g., interdependent/independent orientation), research should explore how and to what extent societal variables (e.g., racism) exert influence on this construct.

Analyze the Costs and Benefits of Self-Determination. Analysis of self-determination efforts during postsecondary transition revealed both benefits and costs to students. Participants practiced self-determination with little guidance in the school setting, and, as a result, they made decisions, such as enrollment in vocational rather

than college preparatory courses, that potentially compromised their goal attainment. Research should examine the comprehensiveness of guidance that accompanies self-determination. Most adolescents experience risks associated with self-determination and have the potential to make errors in judgment that affect goal setting and goal attainment. Ironically, students with LD, for whom a lack of self-determination skills has been documented, are being asked to use self-determination to make decisions about their educational programs in ways that may exceed expectations for students without disabilities. A lack of guidance from school personnel may be particularly problematic for parents and families who are not experienced or well versed in the U.S. education system or the special education system.

Questioning the benefit of self-determination for people with disabilities is problematic. As a result of ableism and discrimination, people with disabilities have historically had relatively little control over their lives (Wehmeyer, 1992). Determining protective and risk factors, however, should not be construed as an effort to limit students' self-determination during postsecondary transition. Understanding support and guidance measures that are currently being implemented as well as those that may be missing should inform practice.

Limitations

As with any study, methodological limitations affected the results of this study. The small number of participants, selected by a method of purposive sampling, makes generalization from these results impossible; however, generalization is not a goal of qualitative research. Rather, the study was designed to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants whose voices have typically not been included in discussions of self-determination and postsecondary transition.

Another potential limitation concerns the limited engagement with participants. Because a researcher's ability to tell the most complete story and to accurately represent participants' perspectives relies in part on established relationships, prolonged engagements are preferable. Although the data for this study were collected over a relatively short period of time (one semester), I was able to make contact with each participant on at least four separate occasions.

Researcher positionality may have posed additional limitations. Aspects of my identity made me an outsider as I conducted research with each of the three groups. In some cases, this was an issue of SES and gender; in other cases, my race further removed my experiences from those of the participants. As discussed earlier, attempts were made to either minimize this distance or to problematize the implications of researcher positionality.

Significance

Few studies have included in-depth reporting and analysis of the perspectives of students who participate in the special education process. Existing self-determination research and model development has focused on individual characteristics requisite to self-determination. This study identifies another area in need of further exploration, namely, the environmental or contextual variables within which students exercise self-determination. Furthermore, this study contributes to the complexity of the discussion surrounding the construct of self-determination by examining the impact of the cultural identities of participants and their participation in the transition planning process.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

1. This study was funded by Student Initiated Grant H324B020083 from the Office of Special Education Programs.
2. I would like to thank Dr. Alba Ortiz for her guidance in the preparation of this manuscript.

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APPENDIX

Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Imagine yourself 5 years from now. Where do you see yourself? What do you see in your future?
2. What are your dreams and hopes for the future?
3. How do you communicate these dreams and hopes to your mom and dad? How about to your teachers?
4. Who else do you talk to about your future goals?
5. Tell me what you think about going to IEP meetings.
 - a. Why do you go to IEP meetings?
 - b. How do you participate?
 - c. What is the best/worst thing about going to an IEP meeting?
6. What does the term "transition plan" mean to you?
7. What is transition planning at an IEP?
8. What kind of decisions are you able to make about your school life? Home life?
9. Tell me what a person has to do to make their future plans become a reality. (Tell me how you plan to reach your goals.)
10. What motivates you to reach your goals?
11. How do you know what your parents' expectations of you are? Your teachers' expectations?
12. What are some decisions you would like your parents to make for you? How about your teachers?
13. What decisions do you or would you want to make for yourself?
14. If you could make any request of important adults in your life, how would you want them to help you to reach your future goals?


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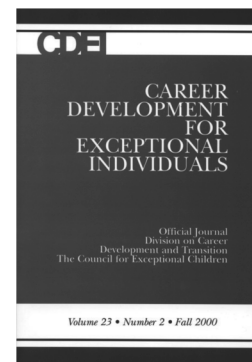
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